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TAGS: [ELAB](#) [KPAO](#) [KDEM](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: TUNISIAN JOURNALISTS UNION ONE STEP CLOSER TO
OPERATION

REF: TUNIS 2661

Classified By: CHARGE D'AFFAIRES a.i. DAVID BALLARD FOR REASONS 1.4 (b)
AND (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY. The Tunisian Journalists' Union (SJT, not authorized by the GOT) has begun coordinating with the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT) to establish a journalists' union under the rubric of the UGTT. The SJT, led by al-Jazeera correspondent and opposition activist Lotfi Hajji, hopes to establish a professional union that will demand greater freedom of speech and protection for independent journalists. Likely due to these goals, the union's activities have been blocked by the GOT for almost three years. The alliance with the UGTT, whose leadership is widely believed to under the influence of the GOT, is a risky proposition for SJT members, who are independent voices in the lackluster domestic media environment. SJT leadership knows this and plans to pull out if the move threatens the organization's independence. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) On November 28, the sole Tunisian labor confederation, the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT) announced the formation of a provisional committee to prepare for the establishment of the Tunisian Journalists' Union (SJT). The 160-member SJT, founded in 2004 by Tunisian journalist Lotfi Hajji, is currently not considered legal although Tunisian law allows for the establishment of a professional union without registration. Hajji's own situation is likely a main cause of its past problems. Hajji is the Tunisian correspondent for al-Jazeera, which is not allowed to operate in Tunisia, and a member of the 18 October Committee, a disparate group of opposition political leaders and activists promoting freedom of expression, association, and amnesty for political prisoners (reftel). As a result, the GOT has declined to renew Hajji's professional identification card since 2004. Further, UGTT Assistant Secretary General Mohammed Trabelsi told LabOff that Hajji's reputation as an Islamist and a labor activist with political aims contributed to the SJT's limitations. (NOTE: In Tunisia, "Islamist" has a strong negative connotation and is a descriptor often used to discredit oppositionists of almost any stripe. END NOTE.)

13. (C) The UGTT announcement that it will work with the SJT, including Hajji, to establish a journalists' union is a major step, particularly as the SJT has a specific focus on increasing freedom of expression and protecting independent journalists. While the UGTT currently includes an "Information Union," whose membership consists of all media employees, from newspaper printers to drivers and journalists, it has never had a journalists' union component. Trabelsi told LabOff over a year ago that it was considering establishing a separate journalists union, if those journalists in the Information Union supported such a move. UGTT support for Tunisian unions is essential to their

survival, as it is the only civil society organization with sufficient power to disagree with the GOT. For example, the UGTT-owned Hotel Amilcar in a Tunis suburb is one of the only facilities in which legal opposition parties can hold meetings and conferences. Despite this independence, however, it is widely believed that the UGTT is reined in by a leadership that works closely with the Ben Ali regime.

¶4. (C) On December 1, SJT founder Lotfi Hajji told PolOff and LabOff that the UGTT announcement appears to be the result of SJT lobbying with the International Labor Organization (ILO) and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU, now the International Trade Union Confederation). Hajji said that at the SJT's urging, the ICFTU asked the UGTT why it did not include a journalists' union, while the ILO pressed the GOT to respect international labor rights. Hajji surmised that this pressure likely led the GOT to ask the UGTT to find a solution for the SJT that would put an end to international labor interest in the SJT's situation.

¶5. (C) Further, if the SJT is part of the UGTT, the latter may be able to exercise some control over its independence. Hajji told EmbOffs that there was significant debate among SJT members about the practicality of working with the UGTT. The SJT "will lose a little or perhaps a lot of its independence," said Hajji, but at the same time the UGTT will give the members courage and power. If the UGTT plays its traditional role in protecting labor rights, the result will be good for journalists, and Hajji noted that some UGTT-affiliated unions continue to be independent. However, Hajji added that SJT members, including him, could always leave the UGTT if too much independence is lost. Further, Hajji said the SJT must take a chance at legitimacy, so that it does not end up marginalized and ineffective like other unregistered civil society entities.

¶6. (C) Hajji explained that the real work of establishing the journalists' union would begin after the mid-December UGTT Congress, which will include the election of UGTT leadership (septel). Then the six UGTT and SJT organizing committee members will begin discussions about establishing the union. Hajji said he remains concerned about the future of a journalists' union in a country where the authorities have been manipulating the journalistic profession for years. Hajji said that the GOT has been "infecting" the media corps, so that today's "real" journalists were yesterday's policemen. Therefore, Hajji added, it's no wonder that so many Tunisian journalists jump at the opportunity to work outside of Tunisia.

¶7. (C) COMMENT. The establishment of a truly independent legal journalists' union could be a significant step towards increased freedom of expression in Tunisia. However, historically, the GOT has seized every opportunity to prevent independent organizations from gaining domestic support or legitimacy. The long-term impact of the journalists' union is likely to be determined by the willingness of the UGTT to offer it consistent support. Unfortunately, the UGTT has an inconsistent record on backing true union and NGO independence, even as the GOT's efforts to control civil society continue to evolve and expand. END COMMENT.

BALLARD